NATURE, HISTORY, AND EXISTENTIALISM*

BY KARL LÖWITH

I

WE ARE accustomed to confront nature with history, and we do so in consequence of a definite historical situation which arose in the sixteenth century with modern natural science. The natural antithesis to nature would be not history but art. In epochs when men were closer to nature than we are, as in classical antiquity, nature, or *physis,* was contrasted with art, or *techné,* that is, with the artificial, which is not "by nature" but is wrought by man, its artificer. According to the classical view, art can do no better than imitate nature. The seeming self-evidence of our familiar distinction between nature and history, and accordingly between natural sciences and humanities, has its origin at the beginning of modern times. Two sciences which characterized themselves as new ones gave the first philosophical expression to this distinction: the anti-Aristotelian natural science of Descartes, and Vico's anti-Cartesian "Scienza Nuova." The criterion of this distinction, however, lies primarily not in the difference of the respective fields but in the secondary distinction as to what can be known about nature and history scientifically. The priority of the problem of knowledge and method over the question of subject matter is again typically modern.

Descartes divided the whole realm of reality into two kinds of being: the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa.* From the principle of being-thinking he constructed nature as the object of mathematical physics. There is a true and certain knowledge about nature; about history nothing can be known truly and with

* This article was originally published in German, under the title, "Natur und Geschichte," in *Neue Rundschau* (1951).

certainty. What we seem to know about history rests on mere tradition, opinion, and custom.

Against this philosophical foundation of modern natural science by Descartes, Vico asserted in his "New Science" the more authentic knowability and truthfulness of the historical sciences of man and his history. He tried to demonstrate that true and certain knowledge is possible only of things which we have made ourselves—that is, of the world of history, the *mondo civile,* where the true *(verum)* and the made *(factum)* convert. The world of nature is inaccessible to man because he did not make it. It is intelligible to God alone as its creator.

With regard to the fundamental division of the world into a natural world and a historical, or man-made, one, even Vico, Descartes' opponent, remains nevertheless a Cartesian—like Pascal, who likewise stated that the whole extended universe of corporeal nature, the stars and the earth, cannot counterbalance the smallest motion of a human mind. The human mind knows the whole universe and itself; the corporeal world is unaware of itself.

This distinction is still maintained on both sides, in the natural sciences as well as in the humanities. F. von Weizsäcker, in his *History of Nature,* epitomizes it by saying that nature is much older than man but only man knows what nature is, working out a natural science which is as such a historical one. Vico's way of posing the question, which was polemically conditioned by Descartes, has developed further with Herder, Hegel, Croce, Dilthey, and Collingwood. It still determines Heidegger's *Being and Time,* where the criticism of the Cartesian ontology rests also on the distinction of two kinds of being which are different in principle: human *Dasein,* which "exists" because it is spontaneously related to the world and to itself; and, on the other hand, beings which are not self-related. Further, only human existence is pervaded by "historicity." Heidegger's existential construction of history from the temporal finiteness of man's existing *Dasein* purports to radicalize the work of Dilthey. Actually, Heidegger achieved the self-redemption of modern histori-

cism, as demanded by Dilthey, only through absolutizing historicity itself. In *Being and Time* nature is conceived not as autonomous and creative, but as an element that we encounter only within our world, this "world" being an existential structure, that is, relative to historical human *Dasein.*

Only Schelling and Hegel have attempted to reduce the traditional distinction between nature and history, as fixed by Descartes as well as by Vico, though in opposite directions, to a comprehensive notion of nature and mind respectively. Impossible though it is to overlook Schelling's lifelong effort to understand nature spiritually and historically, one easily forgets that even Hegel's philosophy of mind and history is but the reverse of his philosophy of nature. The central notion of Hegel's philosophy of history, the "cunning of reason," is not at all restricted to the historical phenomenon of the dialetical perversion of human intentions to unintended effects and results. What Hegel presupposes in principle is not a particular reason in world history but a reason that governs the universe, for example in the lawful motion of the celestial bodies, and is therefore discoverable in the historical world as well. The essential difference is that in nature reason operates without consciousness. In both worlds universal reason unfolds itself in a particular element. He says that one has to arrive at the insight that the purpose of eternal wisdom "manifests itself in the realm of nature as well as in the realm of the active mind." For Hegel the historical world is a sort of "second nature" and a "second world" within the context of the one universe which is fundamentally determined by reason, or, in Christian terms, of the one creation of the one God, who is spirit.

The question, however, is how universal necessity and rationality, in contradistinction to contingency, can determine the historical world if the freedom of human will, interest, and passion belongs to the proper character of the historical world in distinction to nature. To answer this question Hegel introduces the "cunning of reason," which works, as it were, behind the

back of all particular wills and interests, and brings it about that the egotistical will of individual persons must will what is universally necessary and rational, so that the subjectivity of willing receives a substantial content, superseding mere arbitrariness.

In consequence of this fundamental conception of the one world of spirit, Hegel's explanations of the working of the "cunning of reason" refer equally to quite different phenomena: to elementary natural processes, to the building of a house, to the world of history. Chemical and physico-mechanical processes are made serviceable to higher biological ends through the cunning of reason. The flame absorbs the air but it is, at the same time, fed by wood which grows in the trees which are fed by the oxygen of the air. Thus the burning wood, while absorbing oxygen from the air, fights against its own source. A similar dialectic can be seen in the building of a house. The natural elements—fire to melt iron, air to stimulate fire, water to operate the mill which cuts the lumber—all help to build the house. And yet the purpose of the house is to protect us against fire, water, and air. Through a "cunning of reason" the elements are used against themselves. Similarly in world history, human passions and interests satisfy themselves egotistically, apparently for their own sake, but produce willy-nilly the edifice of progressive world history which is reasonable in the whole. Seen from a narrow and single perspective, human beings fight only for their particular rights and against a universal order. But within this struggle a new historical order comes about which determines all the particular wills. The cunning of reason, like divine providence, uses the particular passions and interests, thus bringing it about that human freedom organizes a historical world, instead of dissipating in anarchy.

Hegel's conception of spirit as comprehending nature and history, and Schelling's spiritual philosophy of nature, did not become productive. We are still thinking within the framework of Descartes and Vico. To overcome the dichotomy of Descartes and Vico it would be necessary that our attitude toward the

world, the natural as well as the historical one, be transformed. So-called historicism cannot be overcome without questioning its older counterpart, modern natural science. Our remoteness from such a radical revision becomes evident in the historical materialism of Marx. In his historical thinking Marx was inspired by Hegel's immense historical sense, and on this basis he subjected the whole history of modern civilization to such a radical criticism that it became reduced to a mere "pre-history" of the future. But on the other hand, Marx accepted without criticism, together with the progress of capitalist industry, the methods and results of modern natural science and technique, considering them a marvelous progress. He took it for granted that nature is a mere means and material for the purpose of developing the historical forces of human production.

This way of thinking, however, is not specifically Marxist but is generally modern, and has prevailed since Bacon and Descartes, who proclaimed it the end of science to make man master over nature. The better man succeeded in this the more could natural science be made serviceable to man's historical purposes and projects. Not only did the inventions of natural science expand the range of modern historical movements and accelerate their speed, but also they enlisted nature as never before in the service of history. So-called historicism would be harmless if it had merely historicized and relativized the so-called spiritual world. It made nature relative to us, with the effect that actually nothing natural was left over. In our scientifically organized world naturalness is no longer the standard of nature. What still remains of natural things seems to be a mere leftover of that which has not yet been thoroughly subjected by man. This historical appropriation of the natural world is at the same time an estrangement from it. The earth has not become more familiar to us since we have become capable of covering immense distances in a short time. The more we plan globally and exploit the earth technically the further nature recedes, in spite of all our technical seizure of it.

II

In consequence of this modern tendency to think and to act in terms of purposes, the quest for meaning has become focused in history, because only as history can the world be related directly to man and his purposes. If the world as nature, as *physis* and *kosmos,* ever became absorbed in the world of history the question about the meaning of history would indeed become identical with the question about the meaning of the universe. But who would not feel that that cannot be so? The notion of a "world history" is actually a misnomer, for world history is universal in a very limited sense only. Our "world history" of a few thousand years vanishes in time and space if seen within the whole of the "history" of the universe, and the quest for its meaning can be raised meaningfully only in relation to this spurious segment. We do not ask for the meaning of heaven and earth, the stars, the ocean and the mountains, nor do we ask for the meaning of vegetable and animal life. Our quest seems to be restricted to ourselves and to history as our history. But why do we not ask for the meaning of all that exists, not alone through us but without our devices, by nature? Why does the natural light of the stars mean less to us—almost nothing—than a traffic light? Obviously because the meaning of a traffic light is in its purpose, while the light of sun, moon, and stars has no human and artificial purpose.

Corresponding to the limitation of our so-called world history to our own historical world, the quest for the meaning of history is in itself historically conditioned. It is a specifically Western, even Christian, quest. It can be traced back to the Old and New Testaments' faith in a purposeful story of salvation. It is derived from the assumption that history is directed by a will, and therefore toward a purpose and fulfilment. The end or purpose, and therefore meaning, was originally grounded in the providential will of God. Since the ancient theologies of history became superseded by the modern philosophies of history, the will of God became transformed into the will of man, who plans creatively his own historical destiny. Without a purposeful will,

divine or human, and without a prevision, there is no what-for, no purpose and end as *telos* and *finis* which together constitute an *eschaton*. The possibility of a philosophy of history and of its quest for an ultimate meaning stands or falls with eschatology.

Classical antiquity and the Orient have never asked for the meaning of world history. Oriental thinking does not know the contrast between nature and history, either with regard to world-historical individuals or with regard to the nations that suffer historical destinies. The ancient Oriental ruler rules "historically," inasmuch as he is the "Son of Heaven," and he is a good ruler if he follows the Tao or the "ways of Heaven." Though the Chinese and the Japanese notion of Heaven signifies more than the visible sky, it still comprises this natural notion, from which the cosmic title of Oriental emperors is derived. As for the mass of the people, Orientals still suffer historical catastrophes as natural ones. They submit to them in the same way as to a plague, a flood, an earthquake. There has never been an Oriental Voltaire who proclaimed the historical progress of civilization against nature, and therefore despaired of the meaning of history at the occasion of the great earthquake of Lisbon. For the Oriental mind such events, whether natural or historical, are neither meaningful nor meaningless. They are overruling destinies to which one has to submit instead of overstating them with the Western *pathos* of an "epochal" consciousness or an existential decision, in a unique historical situation.

Oriental wisdom never quested for a meaningful end of history. It did not combine world and history into one single compound. In comparison with this ancient wisdom all the striving in America and Russia is but the extreme consequence of modern Europe. The ultimate aim of this Western will is the fulfilment of a historical purpose, and therefore of historical meaning. The predominant philosophies of history in Europe, America, and Russia agree in the common will to achieve a meaningful aim. Aims can be reached only through progress—of whatever kind: progress toward the fulfilment of conscious freedom (Hegel),

toward scientific positivism (Comte), toward a classless society (Marx), toward a conscious decline (Spengler), toward a universal religion as the creative escape from a declining civilization (Toynbee). All are directed toward an aim and are therefore progressive toward the fulfilment of a meaningful purpose.

One could, of course, object that Oriental thinking is foreign to the West, and contend with Hegel that the Orient has not yet grasped the full meaning of spirit, freedom, and will, which manifested themselves first with the Greeks and then in the Christian era. But even classical Greek thought is no closer to our historical thinking. Greek philosophy and historiography never fancied that history has a purposeful and meaningful orientation toward a future fulfilment. No Greek philosopher ever thought out a philosophy of history. Aristotle, who dealt with everything—animals and plants, earth and heavens, politics and ethics, rhetorics and poetics—did not write a single treatise on history, though he was the teacher and friend of Alexander the Great and a contemporary of one of the greatest historical events. The Greeks asked primarily about the *logos* of the *kosmos,* but not, like Jews and Christians, about the Lord of History as a story of redemption. The Greeks were deeply impressed by the visible order and beauty of the universe, and the natural law of becoming and disintegrating determined also their vision of the historical world. In the eyes of the Greeks, that which is always the same and everlasting, as it appears year after year in the "revolution" of the heavenly bodies, manifested a deeper truth and aroused a higher interest than any radical historical change. As for the vicissitudes of human destiny within this orderly *kosmos,* they trusted that man is capable of meeting every situation, even a hopeless one, with magnanimity.

Classical humanity never put itself into a vacuum with unconditional trust or faith, as Judaism and early Christianity daringly did. It is precisely such an adventure of faith which is demanded by the quest for an ultimate meaning of history, because the visible events do *not* show an ultimate fulfilment and do *not* give

an answer to such a radical question. Christian trust in a future fulfilment has been abandoned by modern historical thinking, but the perspective toward the future as such has been maintained. It pervades all European thought and all our concern with the whence and whither of the historical process. Together with the horizon of the future the quest for meaning as goal and purpose has persisted.

The future is the true horizon of history and historical thinking only if the truth rests in the Jewish-Christian faith in a future redemption. And since the West is still a "Christian Occident," its historical consciousness is eschatological, from Isaiah to Marx, from Augustine to Hegel, from Joachim to Schelling. This holds also for political history. The English, French, and Russian revolutions would not have taken place without the faith in progress, and secular faith in progress would hardly have come into existence without the original faith in an ultimate goal of human existence. "The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God is the flexible starting point of all progressive thinking and the beginning of modern history" (Friedrich Schlegel). The significance of this eschatological orientation consists in this: that it was capable of conquering the ancient fear of fate and blind fortune. Comparable to the compass which gives us orientation in space, and thus enables us to conquer it, the eschatological compass gives orientation in time by pointing to an ultimate goal and thereby to an ultimate meaning of historical vicissitudes.

III

The identification of meaning and end or purpose is not an arbitrary one, but neither is it absolutely required. The metaphysical place of ultimate "meaning" might be found precisely where no aim is willed. Then the relation of meaning and purpose would have to be reversed, in the sense of ancient wisdom, according to which it is the end of man to contemplate the natural universe of heaven and earth, which is free of purpose.

The exclusive emphasis on our human existence and on the

world as a historical one has a concomitant in the lack of sense for that which is natural. This denaturation of human life to a historical existence did not, however, arise with modern historicism and existentialism, but with modern natural science. It is against the background of nature as conceived by modern natural science that existentialism itself comes into existence, for its basic experience is not the historicity but the contingency of human existence within the whole of the natural world. If we reflect upon the history of Western thinking a distinct turning point can be seen when the pre-modern concept of an essential human existence within an orderly *kosmos* changes into a chance-existence. The change occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as a consequence of the astronomical discoveries of the sixteenth century. From then on writers and preachers indulged in what may be called a cosmology of corruption. The universe seemed to have lost all its harmony and stability. Mutability extended from the earth to the heavens, and man was lost in an incoherent world. John Donne expressed this mood strikingly in his *Anatomy of the World* (1611), to which Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is the counterpart. In the words of Donne:

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to looke for it.
> And freely man confesse that his world's spent,
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seeke so many new; and see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
> 'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;
> All just supply, and all Relation:
> Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
> For every man alone thinkes he hath got
> To be a Phœnix, and that then can bee
> None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.
> This is the world's condition now.

What men need is a "new compass for their way."

It was Pascal who drew the philosophical and theological consequences from the impact of the "new philosophy" of nature upon the condition of man. He reset, as it were, the compass of Christian faith in accordance with a changed universe. His existential *pathos* and his insight into the "human condition," an expression which was thereafter to replace the "nature of man," cannot be separated from his new conception of the universe, the basic character of which is its infinity in time and space. We "exist" de facto, in the sense of existentialism, because we are lost in the infinite universe of modern natural science. This was clearly realized by Pascal when he compared the human condition with the zero point between the infinitely great and the infinitely small. With the mathematization of nature man lost his own nature too. There is an intimate relation between the experience of a naked, factual, absurd existence, cast into the world, and the anonymity of the world itself in which we happen to exist.

A few instances may illustrate the rising experience of the contingency of human existence and its cosmological implication. I take them from Pascal, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. All of them illustrate the physical and metaphysical homelessness of modern man within the whole of the world.

In a fragment of Pascal's *Pensées* we read: "When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill . . . , cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and shocked at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?"

Like a quieting answer to Pascal's fear in face of the unfathomable infinities of objective time and space, sounds Kant's theory of time and space as subjective forms of intuition. But Kant, too, experienced the radical contingency of human existence, even of the whole creation. The conclusion of his *Critique of Practical*

Reason contains the well known passage of the starry heavens above us and the moral law within us. The two worlds, the outer one of nature and the inner one of moral existence, are connected in our consciousness, but in themselves they are completely disparate. In the face of the universe natural man is nothing; in relation to himself as a moral person he is all-important and the natural world is nothing. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant goes further. Like a radical existentialist he realizes the impossibility of establishing the inner necessity of the whole creation. To establish it we would have to know that there is an ultimate principle of existence which exists necessarily or essentially. But we cannot conceive of any existence, not even of that of God, as necessary. This, says Kant, is a true abyss for human reason. "We cannot put off the thought, nor can we support it, that a Being, which we represent to ourselves as the highest among all possible beings, should say to himself: I am from eternity to eternity, there is nothing beside me, except that which is something through my will—*but whence am I?* Here all sinks away from under us, and the highest perfection, like the smallest, passes without support before the eyes of speculative reason, which finds no difficulty in making the one as well as the other to disappear without the slightest impediment."

What remains is total and radical contingency of existence, existence without support, a thought which Kant felt to be intolerable for human reason, while its opposite, inner necessity, is undemonstrable. The difference between Kant and modern French existentialists is that the latter seem to have managed to find radical contingency tolerable and even liberating, and the demonstration of an inherent necessity unnecessary.

Kierkegaard states that the interest in existence is wholly opposed to a possible interest in the laws of the natural world. For an "existing thinker" neither the cosmic law nor the moral law has a proper interest, but only the isolated human existence as such, which is singled out religiously by its relation to God. Shocked by the absolute contingency of our worldly existence

Kierkegaard advanced the following questions: "Who am I? How came I here? What is the thing called the world? How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise? And if I am compelled to take part in it, where is the director? I should like to make a remark to him."

In spite of the literal resemblance of this passage to that of Pascal, there is a distinct difference of tone and intention. With Pascal the frightful contingency of man's existence is apprehended within a definite frame of reference: the spatial and temporal infinites of the physical universe. For Pascal the world is not a "big enterprise" but the majestic and overwhelming reality of the universe. With Kierkegaard and the existentialists this physical universe, as conceived by modern natural science, is present only as the hidden background of man's forlorn existence. Insignificant though this natural background seems to be existentially, it is the reverse of existence as understood by existentialism.

From this cosmological nihilism of modern subjectivity Nietzsche drew the last consequences in his attempt to recapture the lost world of the Greek *kosmos* for the existence of modern man. His starting point, to be sure, is the modern one, that is, the insight that since Copernicus man has been "falling from a center toward an x." In an early sketch "On Truth and Falsehood in a Transmoral [cosmic] Sense" he says that man is lost in some corner of the universe with its infinite systems of worlds upon worlds. He has no key to nature. To recapture the truth of the natural world, and thereby of human existence, Nietzsche ventured his great experiment of "re-translating man into nature" —into the *logos* of the *kosmos,* into the eternal recurrence of the same, namely, the everlasting process of becoming and disintegrating.

Accordingly, Nietzsche is also the modern philosopher who made an attempt to overcome the quest for a meaning as aim and purpose. He wanted to extricate himself from nihilism and to regain the natural truth of the universe as *kosmos* and *physis.* But how is it possible to will that which is what it is by nature?

Willing aims necessarily at an end and where-to. A will without an aim would live in a *horror vacui*. Hence Nietzsche's insight that "we prefer willing nothingness to not willing at all." Nihilism means to Nietzsche that the ultimate aims, or values, devaluate, that man as will lacks an aim. To overcome nihilism, the boundless freedom of emancipated willing must ultimately be overcome. Man must learn to will "backwards," that is, to accept all that is already there, without his purposeful will; man must be willing to conform to the cosmic law of the world, which is "innocent" because it has no aim, no purpose and no meaning. What at first seems to be extreme nihilism, a human existence without purpose and meaning, is thus reversed to the highest positivity: to coexist with the natural world of eternal self-creation and self-destruction, "without aim, unless there be an aim in the happy self-sufficiency of the circular movement, without a will—unless a circle bear good will to itself." The reason for Nietzsche's philosophical shipwreck was not that he revived the classical vision of the *kosmos* as an eternal recurrence of the same, but that he attempted to establish its truth by his own creative will, under the title of a "will to power."

Modern thought has in no way surpassed Nietzsche's attempt to restore the truth of all existence cosmologically. It is true, contemporary existentialism radically posits again the old question about Being and Nothingness, but it is caught in the contingency of human existence within the totality of the universe.

The world which is concretely analyzed by contemporary existentialism is neither a living *kosmos,* seen with Greek eyes, nor an order of creation, as understood by Christian faith; nor is it the world of mathematical physics. It is only our historical world of selfhood and interhuman relations, in short, a world without nature. In Sartre's *Être et le Néant* nature is an opaque *en-soi* over against the *pour-soi* of human existence. It is accessible only in the natural appetites of the human body. In Heidegger's *Being and Time* nature is comprised under the lowest category of the merely "extant," in contrast to human existence, which

alone has a world and can have meaning. Kierkegaard is exclusively concerned with the inwardness of selfhood. He scorned the discoveries of telescope and microscope. A thoughtful person, he says, who wants to understand what it means to exist as a self before God cannot be interested in natural science, for it does not make the least difference to our moral and religious decisions whether the moon consists of blue cheese or of something else. To busy oneself with billions of years of cosmic history, or with a few thousand years of Hegelian world history is, according to him, but an escape from authentic existence.

This completes the isolated contingency of human existence, its total homelessness. And indeed, how can one feel at home in a universe which is conceived as the chance result of statistical probabilities, and which is said to have come into existence through an explosion? Such a universe cannot inspire confidence or sympathy, nor can it give orientation and meaning to man's existence in it. We are then indeed "cast" into this world, and have therefore to "project" ourselves. Even the most recent conception of time and space, and the assumption that beyond certain limits the concepts of time and space cease to be applicable at all, cannot restore the universe as an encompassable world order into which man fits. Such a universe can perhaps be figured out, but it is no longer imaginable, and the scientist who calculates it does not live in it as a human person.

Neither classical philosophy nor Christian theology understood man's position in the world in this way. To Aristotle existence meant an unquestionable element within the essential structure, order, and beauty of a dependable and clearly defined *kosmos,* which includes the existence of rational animals called men. As an animal, man shares in the natural character of nature; as a reasonable being, he has the privilege of contemplating and investigating the perfect hierarchy of all essential existences. To Augustine man and universe were both contingent existences, but created by God. Though only man was created in the image of God, therefore surpassing the animal world, the uniform con-

ception of creation affects nevertheless world and man alike. The Christian God, it is true, does not reveal Himself in the heavenly bodies or in a holy animal, but exclusively in mankind and thus in "history." But Jesus Christ redeems not only fallen man but, with him, the whole of a fallen creation.

With the dissolution of these two ancient convictions—the classical and the Christian—historicism and existentialism came into being. If the universe is neither eternal and divine (Aristotle) nor contingent but created (Augustine), if man has no definite place in the hierarchy of an eternal or created cosmos, then, and only then, does man begin to "exist," ecstatically and historically.

This explains also the boundless intensity of modern history. Our extreme concern with the historical world as the only scene of human destiny is the result of our estrangement from the natural theology and cosmology of antiquity, and from the supernatural theology of Christianity. Both offered a frame of reference for the experience of history, and a horizon for its understanding. The loss of this delimitation by and foundation in classical cosmology and Christian theology has created that absolute relevance of history which we are now inclined to take for granted.